

97-84015-11

Lodge, Oliver, Sir

Competition v. co-operation

Liverpool

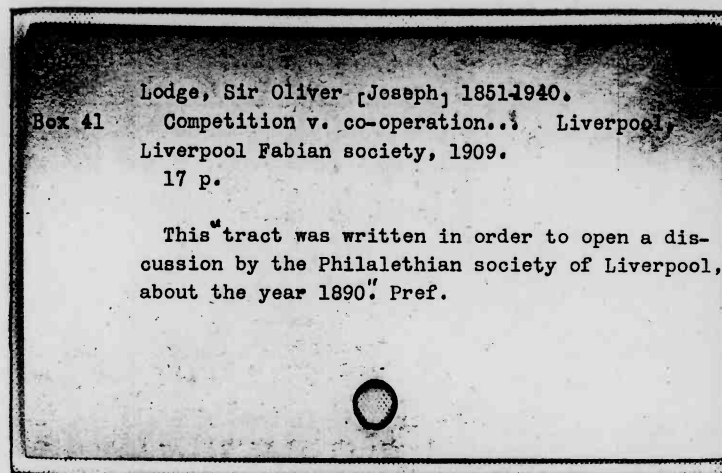
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DATE FILMED: 2-5-97

INITIALS: PB

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Competition v. Co-operation

By
Sir Oliver Lodge

Published by
The Liverpool Fabian Society

ONE PENNY.

COMPETITION
v.
CO-OPERATION.

COMPETITION
V.
CO-OPERATION

BY
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LIVERPOOL
LIVERPOOL FABIAN SOCIETY

1909.

PREFACE.

The following tract was written in order to open a discussion by the Philalethian Society of Liverpool, about the year 1890.

Its reprinting by The Fabian Society of Liverpool was permitted a few months later, and it is now re-issued by them.

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COMPETITION v. CO-OPERATION.

THERE is a deadly fallacy abroad that competition is a good thing, and that without it life would be harder and worse than it is. I call it a fallacy, and thereby doubtless beg a large question: I wish to treat it as a fallacy, and if therein wrong to be enlightened.

Economists I believe teach, or have taught, that competition is healthy, and that if you destroy it you sap the springs of energy and reduce life and civilisation to a less developed state.

Without the spur and stimulus of competition the man of business would not be so early or so long at his office, would not work at fever heat all day, would not watch with such anxiety every opening for a market and every fluctuation in prices, and as a consequence trade and commerce would not flourish as they do. Or, as I should prefer to put it, other and less able and energetic people could make a livelihood without so keen a struggle.

I wish to maintain that competition, so far from benefiting us or increasing our wealth, is one of the curses of civilisation, and that substantial progress will be impossible till it is got rid of.

That it increases our true wealth, in the sense of weal or well-being, I suppose few would be hardy enough to maintain; but I hold that it does not even conduce to material prosperity—such prosperity as the economists themselves contemplate.

What is the good to me that I can buy a hat in any one of twenty shops in the town; I don't want twenty hats. I don't want to be bothered with a great selection of hats. One good shop is enough. I don't mean that it might not have local branches for distribution, just as it might have carts, but one system of management is enough, and by it hats could be sold at a fair price.

When I buy a cake of soap or a pill why should I pay for a number of large boards all over the tramcars and hoardings and country meadows, emphasising its merits over other cakes of soap or pills. Pay for them I certainly must, since it can hardly be held likely that someone sets up these boards from philanthropic motives, being really anxious that you should use only the very best, and putting himself to great expense to let you know which it is.

All advertisements, all cadging and touting and commercial travelling, must be paid for by the consumer. Everything must be paid for by him; and a

great part of this everything is due to competition.

The halfpenny book postage to Russia and America is astonishing, but I suppose not remunerative. A letter can, however, be profitably carried for a penny from here to Aberdeen, and delivered with regularity and promptitude. How could that be done if we had a number of rival carriers all touting for custom, if different patterns of postage stamps had to be advertised, and if the price of them were liable to jump up and down according to some fantastic law of supply and demand?

The only possible use of a fluctuating price in stamps would be this, that they might become objects of speculation, and a number of more or less human beings might be maintained by strenuously watching the market, and buying or unbuying largely at every fluctuation; a crew of sweaters whose futile occupation would in the absence of competition be gone.

But, it will be said, if you don't have competition you will have monopoly, and surely that is worse?

I don't know that it is worse; it is clearly worse in the obvious sense, but then it is so much easier to deal with. That society should allow itself to be ridden by a monopolist, only shows that society is an ass. When an abuse

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has only one neck it is not difficult to deal with.

But there is no doubt that, at present, society is in a state of lethargy or blindness. As a whole it is only in process of acquiring eyes. Either it has not yet grown the sense, or its eyes have been bandaged all these centuries. Lucidity is all that is wanted, and there are signs that it is coming. This little book* is but one of the signs. It does not strike a high note; there is little ideal about it. Others have painted Utopias; this tries to see things as they are, to tear some of the blinkers from the eyes of society. Brutal and blundering I fear it will be for some time after the bandages are removed. A period of revolution is never pleasant to live in for folk who want peace and quiet, but it must come. It need not be bloody, like the French, or the impending Russian revolution—the evils are not irremediable enough for that,—but it will be a time of upheaval and unrest. Perhaps we are in the beginning of it now.

The recent scarcity of coal opened some people's eyes to the blind folly of permitting the underground wealth of earth to become private property and

* "Merrie England," a strikingly able exposition addressed to a typical workman, by Robert Blatchford

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aggrandise the family happening to own the surface. And this "owning of the surface" is a matter that will not brook long delay.

Thus, then, with monopoly I say an awakened society will make short work,—but how can it deal with competition?

How without it can it secure that soap, for instance, shall be both good and cheap? How supply the enterprise that has evolved the article of Pears or Sunlight? How raise humanity from the crude yellow bar?

Well it is a simple matter. I assume that the production of soap is a chemical process, presided over by a chemist; presided over at any large works by an actual chemist, usually imported from Germany (quite properly so, since they are better chemists than we are); and all the improvements are really made by that gentleman, who is paid a very modest salary and is seldom a partner with a share in the profits.

Now then, suppose the firms making soap were really a social community, with no private ends to serve or fortune to make, but managed the concern as a postmaster manages his department; and suppose the soap were not felt to be quite up to the mark, what should the nation do? Why should it not pay a competent chemist, and provide him

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with suitable appliances, to make experiments and devise a better material? Why should it not, if he succeeded, give him a peerage?

The power of society to stimulate individuals and get excellent work out of them is something stupendous when it chooses to exert it. What labour and harassments will not be gone through for a simple knighthood? What toil and danger and hardship is sometimes endured with no recognition but a medal—an iron cross perhaps—and sometimes not even that; ten shillings from the poor-box sometimes!

Emulation is not competition.

Emulation is wholesome and right as a stimulus. It is not the beef and the pudding of life, but it may well be considered the salt and the mustard.

Competition is the wrangling of savages round a table at which they might sit at peace and pass each other victuals; it is the grabbing of the dishes as they are brought on by the waiters of Providence—the laws of nature; it is the filching from weaker neighbours of their portion, so that one is hungry and another is drunken.

Emulation is the aspiration of a soldier to lead a forlorn hope, the desire of a student to make a discovery, the ambition of a merchant to develop a new country or establish a new route.

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Competition is the snarling of dogs over the same bone.

Emulation is the desire to do a thing better than it has been done by others. Competition is the desire to do instead of others that which is now equally well done by them.

That University College, Liverpool, should emulate Owens' College, Manchester, is wholesome enough; that it should send touts with handbills for distribution in her gates or corridors, that it should vilify and seek to ruin its sister college: that would be competitive.

So also, that each occupant of a Chair should feel emulation in the discharge of his duty is only decent; that each should sit in his den with a placard over the door offering instruction at the lowest figure, while the students ranging the corridors with cash in their pockets should dominate the scene and distribute their lordly custom as they choose—what is that?

It is a picture of modern civilisation.

Co-operation is the rule at the meal-table, co-operation is the rule at college, and what is the result? Meals are an enjoyable time of reasonable converse, and collegians have leisure wherewith to pursue their studies beyond anything demanded of them by their immediate functions; and their ambition is to take

their place in the advance guard, among the pioneers of human knowledge.

Well, to return to my fable concerning the attainment of quality and cheapness without competition; having got the good soap, several varieties of soap for different purposes, soap that won't wash clothes and soap that will, then let it be on sale at convenient places at a properly fixed and reasonable price. If there is any doubt about the price that will pay for the material, the labour, the organisation, and the distribution, then, once more, let society pay an arbitrator (what is a judge but an arbitrator), and let it be fixed for ten years, or twenty years, or any reasonable time; and for that season let the nation clear its mind of soap and all that appertains unto it, and think of something better.

But, with such a system as that, the needful soap would be made and distributed with so great ease and simplicity—as postage stamps are made and distributed now—that for every dozen men now employed perhaps six would then be enough, or else the dozen need only work at soap for a few hours a day and use the rest of the time in some other way, while the whole army of advertisers and travellers would lose their occupation.

But is that an evil? Their occupation was useless—is useless labour a blessing?

Simply and straightly all useless labour is a curse. Of all the labour that man doeth under the sun how much is useless; how little is really serviceable to the true objects of life!

Use their time in something better, I said,—and the ready scoff leaps up as to the way the working classes use their leisure now.

Too true, but what then; whose is the fault; must it be always so? If so, it is an arraignment of the Deity; perhaps necessary, but not lightly to be undertaken.

Did He make human nature of this low order, or have we made it so? Think of the life of the working classes. How should the term working man be defined? There are a number of grades; and of the highest artisans I do not speak. Taking the term in its lowest denomination, it signifies those engaged in dull occupations in which they take no interest. They are not a lovely or inspiring spectacle. They will make, I fear, shocking bad masters, and the books addressed to them are rather wretched reading. But whether we like them or not there they are, and they form a large part of humanity. How much of their unloveliness is the fault of their

work; not of the work itself but of their mode of employment and remuneration?

When I am looking over a great bulk of examination papers, I am one of the working classes, working for pay and nothing else. Were this my life work, without hope of release, I too might be liable to get drunk, or do anything else that was the idiotic fashion of the time. When I am writing a book or giving a lecture or trying an experiment or making a calculation I am not one of the working classes. The work is interesting, and I like to do it well. So it may be with many of the higher artisans. So I know it is with some. Very good then, theirs is a happy lot. They have no need to repine, and they do not. The labour we delight in not only physics pain but immensely prolongs endurance. Put a man on a bicycle and he will go blithely for hours or even days; put him on a treadmill and he is dead beat in twenty minutes. The action is much the same. Measured mechanically the rate of working is similar. To your Political Economist it would be all one. But in spite of the Political Economist there is such a thing as soul, spirit, verve, zest. In a word there is life, and this the Political Economist in his theory of living has omitted.

When a professional man or a mer-

chant is sarcastic about the Eight Hours Bill and how many hours *he* works, he is talking egregious nonsense, and I suppose he knows it.

When a man is his own master, one of "them as has coats to their backs and takes their regular meals," working, therefore, either for relaxation or for luxuries, he can work twelve hours a day if it pleases him.

And even if he takes up the occupation of a workman for a time—a gentleman, let us say, finds joinering, or ploughing, or even stone breaking, a healthy and not unpleasant occupation for a few hours or days—he jumps to the conclusion that to do nothing else ten hours a day all your life would also be a not unpleasant or unsatisfactory occupation for a developing human being; but in this he is not quite lucid or fair.

That professional men do work hard, however, is true enough; and the fact should silence those who hold that without the stimulus of hunger, and the misery of those dear to you, no work would be got out of mankind. On the contrary, of every high and decent sort of work, *more* can be got from a man well fed and happily circumstanced.

Did Sir Andrew Clark, or Sir Henry Thompson, or do some of those here present, work themselves

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to death for the sake of filthy lucre? I throw not. The lucre in all cases of high and noble work is an adjunct, an accessory; it is among the things that are "added unto you."

And as for low and ignoble work, let us have less of it. Let us, indeed, if so it may be, aim at having none of it.

But mind that scavenging or tailoring, or house-building is not low and ignoble work; nor is any other mode of really serving humanity. Some of the work of a surgeon is little better than scavenging in point of physical pleasantness. Whatever view we take of mankind, it is clear that the majority are not great artists or great philosophers or great anything—there will always be plenty to do the simple humdrum weaving and bricklaying and carpentering. Let it be done honourably and peacefully and pleasantly, without the spur of starvation and the goal of the workhouse. They, too, are ministers of humanity, to be honoured as doing good work after their kind. The really low and ignoble work is the useless work, the work deadly to the spirit and dwarfing to the intellect of man. Work such as this exists in all too great plenty at present; exists, some of it, among what are conventionally styled the upper and middle classes;

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and the world's rewards go to the doers of some of this kind of work.

But if we are to look for a regenerated humanity—if life on this planet is ever to become pleasant, invigorating, and genuinely happy—none of such workers are wanted. If they must exist in the universe, if souls of this calibre must find some spot for their development, let it be on some other planet, not here.

But this is a vain contention; there are no such souls by nature. It is we who grow them. There are, I fear, a few criminal and mad distorted souls—there are no stock-jobbing, touting, jerry-building souls by nature; or I hope there are not.

But if so much work is knocked off and rendered unnecessary, how are folk to get food?

Even as they get food to-day; out of the soil. Is agriculture an unnecessary occupation? It is the one occupation which we fools are abandoning; flocking into anthills to do every other miserable thing but that.

Agriculture is a vital art and industry and science. How has the science of it been neglected! the reclamation of barren soils, the increased fertility of others—it matters not much whether in England or Canada or elsewhere—can furnish food for millions more than at

present exist. There is no lack of food at the banquet if only the guests would cease to scramble and snatch but would pass things reasonably.

The food supply would come just the same if every atom of needless and unholy labour were obliterated. And if the food is there, the people can be fed. If the clothes are there, the people can be clothed. If the houses are there, the people can be housed. Housed and fed and clothed they are not at present. With all this struggle and toil and fierce competition, the result is a depressing state of destitution for a large mass of mankind.

A momentous social revolution waits to be accomplished: fortunate are they who feel fit to lend a hand towards its achievement.

In conclusion I suggest the following propositions:—

1. That much of human labour is unnecessary.
2. That unnecessary labour is that which provide neither for
The necessities of the body;
The enlightenment of the mind;
The enjoyment of the soul; or
The development of the spirit.
3. That much of this labour would automatically cease in the absence of competition.
4. That the stimulus of competition

is apt to spoil the life even of the successful man, by diverting his energies into useless channels and tending to degrade his character, while for the unsuccessful it makes life impossible, and for the average man it makes life a severe strain.

5. That by friendly co-operation all needful work could be better accomplished with less friction than at present; that life might become simpler and more enjoyable, not only for the few of the fortunate classes, but for the many of the overburdened, of whom all but the criminals (including the criminally lazy, who are by no means confined to one class) might and should be reasonably happy and healthily intelligent even on this planet.

6. That a fully developed life is a happier one, and a better training for future existence, than a dwarfed and stunted life.

7. That co-operation tends to promote such development, while competition tends to retard it.

The Liverpool Fabian Society

was formed in 1892.

IT consists of men and women who call themselves 'Socialists' because they aim at the re-organization of Industrial Society on the basis of collective ownership and management of land and capital.

They are 'Fabian' Socialists because they do not believe in revolutionary methods. They hold that the Socialist State will grow up in democratic countries by gradual peaceful changes rather than by violent conflicts between wealth-producers and wealth-possessors.

The work of the Society takes the form of meetings for exposition and discussion; the collection of facts; the investigation of economic problems; the publication of tracts; and the propagation of Socialism in all possible ways.

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